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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

30 April 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Political Role of the Military in Latin America

The policy of the United States is to encourage peaceful change in Latin America as the alternative to violent revolution. In most Latin American countries the military is the only force capable of preventing or controlling the periodic political and economic crises that could open the way to destructive revolutionary upheavals. Frequently, this is either the reason or the pretext for the assumption of power by the military leaders. On some occasions they have used their control of governments or their influence as the ultimate arbiter of national politics to initiate reforms for peaceful change. On others the role of the military has been in defense of the status quo against any real change. On balance, the view of this paper is that if change in Latin America is to be constructive it is more likely to come, in some countries, under military rather than civilian governments. Finally, in some countries where meaningful change will be long in coming in any case, the interim role of the military establishment will be to serve as a restraint on irresponsible officials and as a goad to stand-pat regimes.

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GROUP 1
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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In the best of all possible Latin Americas the governments would be in charge of honest, able civilians chosen in free elections and dedicated to attaining the announced goals of the Alliance for Progress. The distressing fact, however, is that this kind of government remains an ideal rather than a reality in most of Latin America. The failure of civilian government in much of the area is a complex subject. We do not propose to deal with the causes of that failure but only to suggest some of the effects of it at this time. One obvious result is that when a political power vacuum exists in a particular society, other elements of that society will move to fill it. This leads us, then, to a consideration of the political role that the military have played in various Latin American states.

2. Historically the military and the Roman Catholic Church have been the two most highly developed and powerful institutions in Latin America. In the past the influence of these two institutions has, at times, inhibited the growth of representative political parties and institutions. The military, while yielding place to the Church in certain fields such as education and

social welfare, have been a particularly inhibiting factor since they have generally been the most important pressure group in Latin American politics. Despite some striking changes in the attitudes of the military leaders toward their role in government they continue to exert a major and, at times, dominant influence on national politics in much of the area. Until the last decade that influence was generally accepted and received relatively little critical attention from observers of the Latin American scene. Except when they came in bunches, as in 1930, military dictatorships tended to be viewed as a part of the political way of life in Latin America.* Woodrow Wilson had obviously failed in his stated objective "to teach those people to elect good governments." And there is the perhaps apocryphal story that when Harry Hopkins remonstrated with his boss over giving Tacho Somoza ("that S.O.B"), the red-carpet treatment, President Roosevelt could reply, "Ah, but Harry, he's our S.O.B."

* At the end of 1930 the governments in power in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Venezuela, Mexico, and several of the Caribbean countries were either in the control of military dictators or under strong military influence. In the mid-1950's the same was true in Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and much of Central America. In 1954, for example, 13 of the 20 republics were controlled by the military.

3. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly the fashion, particularly in the United States, to denounce Latin American military leaders as disruptors of democratic procedures, destroyers of constitutions, and barriers in the path of the Alliance for Progress. Thus to some observers military government is ipso facto bad government. A recent example of this point of view is Edwin Lieuwen's study, The Latin American Military, prepared for the Subcommittee on American Republic Affairs of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. The record of past military takeovers of Latin American governments provides abundant support for such a thesis, particularly when the Procrustean method is used in selecting the cases and the supporting evidence. We believe, however, that this attitude fails to take into account the changes that have been taking place within the leadership of the Latin American military during recent decades. It will be the thesis of this paper that in some cases the military establishments have been developing both the skills and the incentive for undertaking modernization of their societies. This paper will not argue, however, that any military takeover is per se good or bad. On the contrary, its intent is to show that a wide variety of

motives and consequences are involved in military takeovers and that each case must be evaluated individually and against its particular background.*

4. Our judgments on the political role of the military are relative and not absolute, and they will often be based on two implicit comparisons. The first of these is between the chaotic conditions that have developed under some civilian governments and the efforts of military governments to establish order -- whether successful or not. The other is between the aims of the old-fashioned military takeover and the more recent concern of some military governments with the need to get on with modernization of their societies. And we emphasize again that each case must be examined on its merits. For we believe that an assessment of recent Latin American history indicates that in some cases the alternative to military intervention was not the maintenance of a reformist administration nor even the survival of representative and responsible government, but the continued erosion of civilian institutions, attended by economic

* A discussion of each case is made in the Annex "An Examination of the Record in the Eight Most Recent Military Interventions in Latin American Politics." These involved Peru (July 1962), Guatemala (March 1963), Ecuador (July 1963), Dominican Republic (September 1963), Honduras (October 1963), Brazil (April 1964), Bolivia (November 1964) and Argentina (June 1966).

stagnation and political turmoil and, in some cases, by the threat of civilian dictatorship or civil war.

II. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

5. Indeed, the starting point for an understanding of the political role of the military in Latin America is a sober examination of civilian institutions in the area. We believe that most of the military interventions in the 1960's have been occasioned by the failure of the civilian politicians to do their jobs even tolerably well. To put it bluntly, we believe that these interventions have been the result and not the cause of Latin America's political, economic, and social ills. Past experience in most Latin American countries makes it difficult to argue that representative, constitutional government is much more than a remote ideal towards which these nations are striving. In the last four decades more than 100 unconstitutional changes of government have occurred there. During this period only three countries (Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay) have paid much more than lip service to the requirements and restrictions embodied in their constitutions. In Mexico, politically the most stable country and one where modernization has been proceeding more

rapidly than in the rest of Latin America, an official party has dominated politics on all levels and has tolerated little more than token opposition.

6. Furthermore, in recent years the role of the military in politics and the character of military regimes have been changing. These changes are, in part at least, the result of developments that have been taking place over a longer period as the military leaders have become interested in upgrading the professional capabilities of their forces and have been devoting more of their time and efforts to that end, particularly since World War II. Although the quality of training varies considerably from country to country, military academies have been established in each Latin American state. In Argentina and Chile, for example, their graduates receive the equivalent of 12 to 16 years of academic training. On the other hand, those in El Salvador and Honduras provide an equivalent of from six to ten years of such training. Each country also provides for more advanced training in its own universities, war colleges and command schools, by foreign military missions, and in universities and military schools abroad. The result has been a very considerable increase in the military expertise of these

military school graduates and a broadening of their knowledge of other fields including the technical changes that are taking place in the more advanced countries.

7. At the same time the social origins of the Latin American military officers have also been changing. Increasingly they are being drawn from lower-middle and lower class backgrounds. Where the younger son or sons of an upper-middle or upper class family might formerly have opted for a military career, such individuals latterly have been more attracted by the opportunities that have become available in industrial or commercial establishments, and in the civilian bureaucracy. And increased attention to public education throughout the area has enabled members of the lower classes to qualify for entrance to military academies that was formerly denied them. While race remains a barrier in a few countries, in others the darkening skin tones of Latin American military officers indicate that this barrier has been lowered and that Indians, mestizos, and mulattoes are moving up through the various levels to the top ranks. This is more noticeable in army and air force components than in the naval forces, where the officers still are predominantly from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds.

8. As these changes have taken place the military leadership has tended to veer away from its traditional identity of interests with the oligarchy, in defense of the status quo. It has even exerted pressure for modernization of the particular society, ofttimes in alliance with middle class and lower class elements of their particular society. And when military leaders have taken power they have been removed, in some cases, by other officers who preferred a return to civilian, constitutional government to a continuation of corrupt military rule. In Colombia (1957) and Venezuela (1958), for example, the bulk of the military leadership joined forces with moderate civilian leaders to overthrow the military dictatorships of Rojas Pinilla and Pérez Jiménez. Since then the military establishment has supported the civilian government in both countries despite efforts to reimpose a military regime.

9. Nor do we think that future Latin American military governments are apt to be as repressive or as those mentioned in the preceding paragraph. We would note that at the present time the two most authoritarian and despotic dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere are both dominated by civilians -- Castro and Duvalier. And each of these dictators moved quickly to

reduce the military establishment to a dependent position in order to consolidate his control over the entire country.

10. In the eight most recent military interventions there is certainly much that can be criticized. On balance, however, and when compared with their civilian predecessors, the majority of these military governments have performed rather creditably. In three cases -- Brazil and Bolivia (1964), and Argentina (1966) -- the military leaders took power reluctantly and only after their civilian predecessors had revealed little ability to cope with basic national problems, including mounting threats to political and economic stability. In all three the military regimes have used a heavy-handed approach, but none has resorted to the kind of police-state tactics used by the Paz Estenssoro government that was overthrown in Bolivia. And in each of these countries the military government has undertaken long overdue economic reform programs about which its civilian predecessors had done little more than talk. In three other cases -- Peru (1962), Ecuador (1963), and Guatemala (1963) -- the military leaders took power, on an interim basis, to correct situations they considered intolerable. In these three the military intervention did little to resolve basic problems but the military

leaders are supporting the civilian authorities to whom they returned or relinquished power.

11. On the other hand, when judged from their performance in Honduras and the Dominican Republic, during 1963, the military forces in those countries were a predaceous lot, whose actions warranted the harsh criticism they have received. One would be hard put to it to argue that the military leaders who intervened in Honduras and the Dominican Republic were more capable of governing those countries than the administrations they removed. A depressing aspect in these two cases, and in Peru and Guatemala as well, is that the military leaders probably would not have acted when they did and the way they did if the civilian political leadership in each case had demonstrated even a glimmering of political acumen. But Presidents Bosch and Ydígoras, and the rejected civilian candidates in Honduras and Peru as well, acted as if they were oblivious of the concept that politics is the art of the possible -- especially when dealing with the real locus of political power in their particular society.

12. We believe that there will continue to be a wide variety of military governments in Latin America over the foreseeable future. We would emphasize that not all the military establishments are moving effectively towards modernization and

professionalization; some have made very little progress and some have impeded any progress. Thus their performances probably will range from poor through commendable. We would also emphasize that these military governments will reflect the particular societies that produced them -- an aspect of the problem which is so obvious that it will probably continue to be overlooked (Perón at his worst was not a Trujillo). While some military governments will relinquish power when civilian political forces evidence an ability to govern, it may require revolutions to get rid of others.* In some cases the leadership of the revolutions which sweep away the vestiges of the past and prepare the way for more enduring representative government will come from the military. In others the military will continue to support the kind of stability that serves only as a barrier to the changes that are prerequisite to modernization. But in any case the military leaders will continue to play an important and often dominant role in Latin American politics; at least until their societies develop

* We would also note that when civilian or military dictatorships have been overthrown, part of the military establishment has always been involved.

political and social institutions able to cope with their particular problems.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

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ABBOT SMITH
Chairman

ANNEX

An Examination of the Record in the Eight Most Recent Military Interventions in Latin American Politics

1. Peru (July 1962)

In 1962 the Peruvian military leaders intervened to prevent a politician they despised and mistrusted from attaining access to power. They held power for a year and relinquished it when a new election provided an acceptable civilian president.

In the presidential election of June 1962 none of the three principal candidates secured the 1/3 plurality needed for direct election. Between the election and the meeting of the Congress which would choose among those three candidates, a deal was cut between Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the APRA leader-candidate, and Manuel Odría, former dictator (1948-1956) and candidate of the National Odriista Union (UNO). Odría, who had run third, would be elected president, an Aprista would be first vice-president (in line to succeed Odría who was not in good health), and APRA would control the Congress. It was clear that APRA and the UNO had the Congressional strength to carry out this arrangement. Such a deal, however, was anathema to the military leaders on three major counts. In the first place, it would put Haya de

la Torre, whom they regarded as a homosexual and the instigator of the assassination of military officers during an Aprista uprising in 1932, in a position to influence government policy immediately and to inherit power if Odría became incapacitated. Secondly, it would have restored power to a former dictator (Odría), who was widely disliked by the military leaders. Finally, it left out in the cold the one candidate favored by the military, Fernando Belaúnde Terry. In order to void the election, the military removed President Manuel Prado from office (18 July 1962), and installed a military junta to hold power until new elections were held. Incidentally, Belaúnde's reaction to his failure to win the election was to flee to his hometown, Arequipa, where he tried unsuccessfully to launch a rebellion in the interval before the military took power.

Since spokesmen for the Armed Forces had made it abundantly clear that they would never permit Haya de la Torre to come to power in Peru, the seizure of power by the military was no surprise. Their performance in power was not impressive even though they went further towards agrarian reform in one year than their civilian predecessor had in nearly six years. In essence what the military junta did was to conduct a holding operation while

Belaúnde arranged an electoral coalition with the Christian Democrats. After a freely contested and honestly counted election (June 1963) gave Belaúnde a clear plurality, the military leaders relinquished power to him and have supported his efforts to modernize Peru. They did not respond affirmatively to US official and public pressure for holding elections "soon," and they gave short shrift to one member of the junta who tried to use it as a springboard to power. It is also clear that if Haya de la Torre had been elected in 1963 the military leaders would not have permitted him to assume power; nor will they if he is elected in 1969. His insistence on being its candidate was a real tragedy for the Aprista movement; particularly since there were other Apristas who probably could have established a modus vivendi with the military leaders.

2. Guatemala (March 1963)

In early 1963 Guatemala was beset by a recurrent Latin American problem -- the orderly transfer of political power. The military leaders provided a temporary solution by seizing and retaining power for three years before holding an election that provided a successor to whom they then returned power.

In 1963 President Miguel Ydígoras, according to the country's constitution, had to hold elections to choose his successor. This presented a problem. The candidate Ydígoras preferred had little backing among Guatemalans. If open elections were held, the probable winner would be former President Juan José Arévalo (1945-1950), widely regarded as pro-Communist and with a lengthy record of anti-US activities. When Ydígoras equivocated and let Arévalo return to the country, the military leaders took power under the leadership of Col. Enrique Peralta. Peralta and his followers apparently believed they were acting in the interests both of their own country and of the US in preventing Arévalo from returning to power. Thus they were rather dismayed when US recognition was delayed and US public opinion was somewhat critical. Their reaction becomes even more understandable when one recalls the arbitrary and capricious style of the Ydígoras regime, its gross corruption and bumbling, its failure to make any effective progress towards goals of the Alliance for Progress, and its obvious intention to install an even more corrupt and reactionary politician as its successor.

Governing from his post as minister of defense, Peralta undertook no basic reforms; his circumscription of civil liberties further alienated leftist and moderate groups, and he largely ignored the insurgency movement that was already underway when he assumed power. Nevertheless, by Guatemalan standards Peralta gave his country nearly three years of reasonably honest and effective government. And to the surprise of everyone -- including the candidate he favored -- Peralta not only held open elections but also overrode military and civilian efforts to nullify the election results when Julio César Méndez Montenegro, the candidate of the moderate left, won a clear plurality. It is perhaps ironical that under Peralta's liberal civilian successor civil liberties and due process of law have gone a long way down the drain, and that terrorism -- from the extreme left, from the extreme right, and by government forces -- has become the order of the day. Only recently has President Méndez moved to rein the government-sponsored terror by removing the military leaders in charge of it. Whether he can make his action stick remains to be seen.

3. Ecuador (July 1963)

The most recent of numerous military interventions in Ecuador was carried out to remove a chief executive whose public and private conduct was disgraceful by almost any standards. The military leaders had little success in imposing reform from above and in less than three years civilian pressure groups forced them to relinquish power.

José María Velasco Ibarra, a four-time President of Ecuador, has declared that his is a difficult country to govern.* In 1961 he was removed early in his fourth term by a military coup which had some civilian support. His successor, Carlos Julio Arosemena, had enough political cunning to retain power for some 20 months despite his frequent public drunkenness, and his general inept performance in office. When the embarrassed military leaders finally removed Arosemena in July 1963, they formed a military junta whose declared aim was to carry out extensive political, economic, and social reforms before returning the country to civilian rule. But the Velasco Ibarra dictum was verified once more when civilian agitation, including reactions against such reforms, forced the military junta to resign (in March 1966) after it had carried out only a small portion of its program. Since then a provisional civilian government has received support from the present military leaders who appear to have little stomach for another try at running Ecuador.

* Since he completed only one of the four terms to which he was elected, Velasco Ibarra speaks with some authority.

4. Dominican Republic (September 1963)

The Dominican military leaders were able to overthrow President Juan Bosch without a struggle because he had alienated the country's most powerful political, economic, and religious groups and had not retained his wide popular following. The military leaders, however, were unable to set up a puppet government that was both pliant and effective; their removal of a hand-picked but capable executive led to the Dominican crisis of early 1965.

The overthrow of President Juan Bosch (September 1963) by a military coup was widely regarded as a severe setback for the Alliance for Progress. Bosch, elected by a decisive majority less than a year before, had received extensive material assistance and vocal support from official and unofficial circles of the US. His administration had undertaken a program of wide-ranging reforms to modernize a society that had recently emerged from three decades of repressive and often brutal totalitarian military dictatorship. But even as Bosch was antagonizing the country's vested interests -- the military, the large landholders, commercial interests, and the Church's hierarchy, he was letting his popular support melt away. When the military moved to take over, in the face of US support for Bosch, there was almost no resistance.

The Dominican military leaders had acted against Bosch to protect their privileged position and used the fiction of a Communist threat to disguise their actions. They installed a provisional civilian government whose performance was so inept that the military finally asked Donald Reid, a businessman who was serving as Foreign Minister, to take charge of the executive triumvirate. In a little over a year Reid had "taken charge" so effectively that he was threatening the perquisites and political power of the military leaders. In April 1965 they reacted by intervening to remove Reid from power.* The events which have occurred in the Dominican Republic since then suggest that military leaders have not moved very far towards an apolitical position and that concern for the national welfare is not yet the determining factor in their conduct. The military establishment, however, has supported President Joaquin Balaguer, a conservative civilian who defeated Bosch in the election of June 1966.

* Some of the middle and lower-level officers, who joined in overthrowing Reid, did so because they wanted to restore Bosch to power under the Constitution he had promulgated in 1963. Once Reid was removed the factionalism within the military came into the open.

5. Honduras (October 1963)

In 1963 the probable winner of the scheduled presidential election made it clear that he intended to reduce the influence and prerogatives of the country's armed forces. The military seized power, cancelled the election, and retained power behind a façade of constitutional government.

In early 1963 it looked as if President Ramón Villeda Morales would complete his term of office and turn over control to another civilian. His Liberal Party's candidate, however, did not have Villeda's common sense. Where Villeda had carefully made and maintained his peace with the country's military leaders, Modesto Rodas Alvarado not only avoided any agreement with them, he also declared openly that once elected he would cut the military down to size. He was obviously preparing for such action, while still a candidate, by taking measures to strengthen the civilian militia forces of the Liberal Party. Under the Honduran constitution the Armed Forces had a special position, including virtual autonomy in military matters. A few days before the election was to be held the military leaders moved to overthrow Villeda. They cancelled the election, easily overriding the resistance of the Liberal Party's civilian militia. Subsequently, the leader of the coup, Col. Oswaldo López,

cooperated with the opposition, minority Nationalist Party and was selected to serve as "constitutional" president (1963-1971). López has retained his control over the military and uses the new constitution as a façade for military-conservative domination of the country. Progress towards the goals of the Alliance for Progress has not been headlong.

6. Brazil (April 1964)

The Brazilian military removed President João Goulart because his actions threatened military discipline and Brazilian institutions. The military controlled administrations have carried out badly needed economic reforms but have not been able to make similar progress on political problems.

When President João Goulart of Brazil was removed by a civilian-backed military coup, US recognition was not long delayed. Although Goulart was a constitutional president his maladroit conduct of the government had brought the country to the brink of economic disaster and had alienated a wide spectrum of opinion which normally opposes military intervention in politics. His penchant for demagogic tactics and extreme leftist advisers had also aroused the fears of anti-Communist leaders in Brazil and abroad. When Goulart intervened to set aside military disciplinary measures which had been imposed on enlisted men for political agitation in his support, the anti-Goulart military leaders used his action to unite the military establishment against him.

After removing Goulart the Brazilian military government carried out an extensive purge of the country's political leaders, abolished the political parties, and organized new ones. It also

undertook unpopular but sorely needed economic measures to reverse the downward slide in the economy and to restore fiscal solvency. The form of constitutional government has been maintained, but the military establishment remains the locus of political power; a second general has succeeded the first in the presidency and elections are carefully controlled to keep the opposition impotent. After nearly four years of responsible government by the military, however, the odds are that a withdrawal of the military from politics would be followed by a return to the kind of civilian regime that produced the economic problems and political strife which led to the military takeover in the first place.

7. Bolivia (November 1964)

In 1964 the Bolivian military removed a civilian administration that had alienated many of its supporters and was using police-state tactics in its efforts to retain power. The military-based administration has not tried to reverse the 1952 Revolution, has restored reasonably effective government, and has shown more respect for civil liberties than did its civilian predecessor.

One of Latin America's few real revolutions was carried out in Bolivia, after April 1952, when civilians supported by the police overthrew a repressive military junta functioning in the service of the country's landed and mining oligarchy. But by 1964, and under the guise of civilian constitutional government, President Víctor Paz Estenssoro had set up a police-state dictatorship which, in fact, was more repressive than some of the area's contemporary military dictatorships.

Meanwhile, the Bolivian military forces had recovered from the physical beating and institutional disarray that befell them in 1952. Early in 1964 the military leaders forced Paz to drop his announced choice for the vice-presidency on the MNR electoral ticket and to accept Air Force General René Barrientos as his running mate. After an uncontested election (May 1964), the existing tensions between Paz and Barrientos increased. By

November 1964 students were rebelling against Paz, the military leadership refused to support him and he soon departed for exile in Peru. A military junta, which included Barrientos, took over and in mid-1966 Barrientos won election to the presidency. The military leaders are back in control, as they were before April 1952, but they are a rather different kind of military leader and they have not tried to reverse the 1952 Revolution. They have restored reasonably effective government with far more in the way of civil liberties than were permitted under the civilian regime of 1960-1964. They have also adopted measures to make the important tin-mining sector of the economy an asset rather than a financial rathole subsidized by US funds.

8. Argentina (June 1966)

The Argentine military leaders seized power in 1966 because they were dissatisfied with the way the civilian government was handling the problems of Peronism and modernization of the nation. The military government has undertaken basic economic reforms and insists that it will retain power indefinitely to ensure that modernization of the country is carried out.

President Artur Illia took office, in November 1963, only because Lt. Gen. Juan Carlos Onganía, then commander-in-chief of the Army, had insisted that elections be held and that the country be turned back to civilian control.* Illia assumed office as a minority president (some 26 percent of the total vote), and without a coherent program. By June 1966 he had what passed for a program but had done little to implement it. And the Peronists were again at the electoral gates, having emerged as the principal gainer in the congressional elections of 1965. Illia's government showed great respect for civil liberties but little ability to get on with the job of resolving the country's pressing political and economic problems. In late June 1966 the military leaders removed him between dusk and dawn with scarcely a hand raised in his defense.

* Arturo Frondizi had been ousted by the military, in March 1962, after he miscalculated the electoral strength of the Peronists, and could find no support among non-Peronist political parties who preferred a military takeover to Frondizi's continuance in the presidency.

The military junta, formed by the commanders-in-chief of the armed forces, abolished the political parties and terminated all legislative and executive tenures on the national and provincial levels. They then installed Onganía as president to exercise both executive and legislative powers. The military leaders set no terminal date for Onganía to relinquish power and made it clear that elections would not be held until the economic and social problems involved in the modernization of the country had been resolved. The present government is a presidential dictatorship supported by the armed forces, which has not resorted to extensive use of repression. Instead of taking the easy road to popularity, it has adopted austerity measures and maintained controls over wage and price levels. It is a sad but just commentary on Argentine political leaders and the country's electorate that the military government has been much more willing to carry out needed but unpopular reforms than its civilian predecessor.